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LA LIGUE POUR LA CULTURE FRANÇAISE¹

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The discussion as to the cultural and practical value of classical study which is so widespread in the United States is also to be found in other countries, and under other conditions and in France perhaps is the issue most sharply defined at the present time.

Notwithstanding the fact that for centuries the educational ideals of France had been closely dependent upon the classic tradition, and that the very genius of the French people was the undeniable result of their rich heritage from the Mediterranean civilizations of the past, some years ago the modern cry for efficiency and preparation for life was raised, the old system of education was sharply criticized, and a revision of educational theories was demanded. Gaston Paris, the great French philologist, had written: "For a nation like our own, whose glory is intellectual as much as military and political, there would be a very great danger, a veritable humiliation, if it should say, I am going to renounce my educational traditions, I am going to abandon Greek and Latin, I am going to devote myself to the modern languages, and to the sciences."² There were many who agreed with him, but all to no avail. The demand for revision was too insistent to be ignored, and a national commission was appointed in 1899 to study the question. Finally after much debate in the Chamber of Deputies, and a flood of articles in the newspapers and reviews, a new program of study was adopted for the secondary schools, or *lycées*, which satisfied the opponents of the classics, and which was intended to provide a system more in harmony with the needs of modern society.

This new program went into effect in 1902. A decade previously, in 1891, an attempt had been made to meet modern

¹ Read at the Classical Conference at Ann Arbor, Michigan, March 29, 1912.

² *Bulletin de la Ligue pour la culture fr.*, December, 1911, p. 8.

demands by creating, in addition to the classical course of study, a modern course with more practical ends. The modern course, however, had been poorly organized. It was installed in the same schools and conducted in the main by the same teachers; it was moreover of the same length as the classical course, and its aims were realized in a most unsatisfactory manner. While about 90 per cent of the students entering the classical course continued it to the end, a much smaller percentage of students finished the modern course, sometimes the number running as low as 8 per cent. It was the general conclusion that the creation of this modern course had merely served to disorganize the classical course, and that there was too great a gulf between the two.

The commission in its work preliminary to the law of 1902,¹ collected the ideas of hundreds of men of all classes—professors, men of letters, scientists, economists, members of local chambers of commerce, and in fact of all who had a reasonable opinion on the subject; their conclusions, practically unanimous, were as follows:

1. The classical course should be more than ever reserved for an élite. Such instruction should be strengthened on its scientific as well as on its literary side. No incompatibility was seen to exist between these two lines of study when properly developed, and it was the opinion that literary studies should not be abandoned too early, as it was a constant fact that the most successful students in the higher technical schools were those who had a broad foundation of liberal study.

2. It was agreed that for the greater number of students a course of study was needed which should prepare more quickly for actual life and which should be short enough to permit them to have some actual contact with the trade or business they were to follow, before the period of military service began.

Such then were the ideas of 95 per cent of those whose opinions were asked by the commission. In the face of this testimony, however, the commission decided that such an educational scheme, which provided a thorough classical training for the intellectual

¹ See *L'Anarchie scolaire*, par Henri Joly, membre de l'Académie des sciences morales et politiques, *Revue des deux mondes*, February 15, 1912, p. 895.

few only and nothing but a short, practical course the greatfor mass of students, was undemocratic and not in harmony with the spirit of a great republic where there should be equal opportunity for all. Consequently a plan was devised whereby four groups, or courses, were created, the Latin-Greek, the Latin-scientific, the Latin-modern-language, and the modern-language-scientific course. By means of these four groups it was hoped to give a certain elasticity to the whole educational system, and to make it possible for the student who had entered upon a purely practical course such as that provided by the modern-language-scientific group, to alter his course, and finally emerge among the élite in the Latin-Greek course, if his tastes and inclinations should finally lead him in that direction. No one could deny that the fundamental idea of this arrangement was admirable, but doubts were expressed as to the practical results to be obtained by it.

Today, this four-group system has been on trial for a decade. As might be expected, students have flocked to the so-called modern groups, and classical study has been neglected; for all four groups were put upon an equal basis, and parents and students alike have been influenced by the familiar appeal to prepare for practical life in a practical way. If this were all, however, the arguments of those who condemn the new education, and seek to restore the old, would have but a sentimental value. But this is not all, for the results obtained from the new system are generally held to be inferior. Students are found to lack the ability to think, write, and speak as clearly as under the old system, and on the other hand are but imperfectly supplied with the concrete facts which the new system had been called upon to exploit. The limited curriculum and the continuity of study which characterized a classical training had enabled students to think consecutively, had cultivated the power of expression, and had developed a discriminating taste; whereas the crowded program of the modern course, depending largely upon the memory, produced too often an ill-assorted, ill-digested jumble of half-truths and vague information.

As this situation became clearly defined, a storm of protest arose, and an organized opposition was the result. Foremost in this opposition is a society calling itself *La Ligue pour la culture*

française, which roughly translated means "The League for French Culture." Its president is Jean Richepin, a member of the French Academy, and upon its committees are to be found all but four of his colleagues in that distinguished body, as well as scores of members of the other learned academies. The directors of the great Parisian newspapers, and of the leading French reviews, as well as the editors of the leading provincial papers, are all supporting the League.

In the manifesto published in the first bulletin issued by this society last December, Richepin calls upon all who are interested in the maintenance of national standards, to rally to the support of an educational idea which an ill-advised public opinion is seeking to discredit. The substance of his argument is contained in the two following statements:

1. There is no conflict between scientific culture and the humanities, for the latter, far from being a mere vain school of elegance, constitute the very best discipline for the mind.

2. There is no antagonism between the humanities and modern society, which, for its continued progress, demands an intellectual élite from which to draw its leaders. Furthermore, the richest source of supply for this élite is to be found in the mass of the people, if a way can be found to make the humanities accessible to it.

A particularly interesting feature of this situation is the fact that many have predicted that the League could not undertake an educational campaign of the kind indicated without being influenced to a certain extent by political considerations. This prediction seems to be warranted by the fact that many have criticized the four-group system with its widely heralded democratic ideals as a political move pure and simple, designed to please the masses and to increase the power of a radical government. Many are inclined to believe that under these circumstances the attempt to restore classical training to its old position of honor is likewise a political move, fostered by conservatives and reactionaries.

The League, however, declares itself as absolutely unpartisan, and as influenced solely by large considerations which are vital to the welfare of the whole people. In support of this contention it has only to point to the varied character of its membership and

to the widely scattered sources of the present dissatisfaction with the existing educational system. The League, in truth, seems to be what it claims to be, a permanent organization by means of which all those now interested in an educational reform may work together.

A few facts will serve to show how widespread this movement has become. In 1910 a committee representing the iron founders of France sent a communication to the minister of public education in which they expressed their disapproval of the four-group system, complaining that the intellectual training of the young engineers whom they were forced to employ was woefully inadequate. Quite recently an open letter signed by 223 students in Paris, representing literary, scientific, and legal study, was addressed to the minister of education, criticizing the existing order. In this letter the students make the following statements: The present system of instruction lacks unity, not only in method, but in its program of study. Latin, which was formerly the center of secondary studies, has lost its preponderance, nor does it seem that the other branches of instruction have profited thereby. The study of French has declined to such a point that among us many graduates lack the most elementary knowledge of literature and of grammar. As for the modern languages, the direct method has been abused to so great an extent that the majority of us have ended our studies without having read a single drama by Goethe or Shakespeare. If in history, mathematics, and geography the results have been generally satisfactory, we have, on the other hand, received at too early a stage notions concerning physics, chemistry, and natural history, which have been necessarily fragmentary and superficial, and which have been a mere exercise in memory. In a word, we have been furnished an abundance of scattered material but not the instrument necessary to co-ordinate it and derive a profit from it.

In addition to this testimony, similar views have been incorporated in resolutions adopted by the Fifth Congress of the Union nationale des étudiants de France, the Association corporative des étudiants en médecine, the law students of the Faculté de Poitiers, and the Société de médecine de Paris. Eighteen provincial academies are likewise supporting the movement, as well as the chambers of commerce in Paris, Lyons, Épinal, and Nevers.

The one particular fact which seems to have precipitated this whole discussion is the growing inability of the rising generation to speak and write French correctly. As is well known, if there is one thing upon which the French have prided themselves, it is the clarity of their language, and they have proudly said, "That which is not clear is not French," *Ce qui n'est pas clair, n'est pas français*. Their present consternation can, therefore, be easily imagined. The present moment, in all seriousness, is considered a critical period in the development of their language; they call it *la crise du français*, and the situation is being earnestly discussed everywhere, even in the columns of the humblest daily newspaper.

It must not be supposed, however, that this discussion is entirely one-sided, for the present educational system has distinguished champions like M. Croiset, dean of the Faculty of Letters of the Sorbonne, and a number of its professors, including well-known men like Lanson and Brunot. To defend their position, these men also have organized a society which is called the *Ligue pour la culture moderne*. They insist that a classical training is unnecessary and their attitude seems to be that the level of study must be lowered in order that a secondary education may be open to those for whom it is now impossible.

The *Ligue pour la culture française*, however, declares the present system a failure, cites figures to show that only 45 per cent of the candidates without Latin succeed in the examination for the Bachelor's degree while 76 per cent of those from the Latin-Greek group, and 72 per cent of those from the Latin-modern-language group are successful; and it asserts that the real need of a democracy is not a lowering of educational levels, but a plan whereby the mass of the people may have access to the highest culture.

Only time can tell which of these two educational ideals will in the end prevail, but the advocates of classical culture in this country can at least find encouragement in the brave fight which is now being made by their colleagues in France.